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General debate on national experience in population matters: assessment of the status of implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development

Statement submitted by Federation for Women and Family Planning, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

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Statement

The Federation for Women and Family Planning welcomes the priority theme of the forty-seventh session of the Commission on Population and Development, "Assessment of the status of implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development". Aware of the significance of the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo in 1994, its 20-year-old Programme of Action and its emphasis on the interrelationships between population, sustained economic growth and sustainable development, economic status and the empowerment of women, we would like to reflect on the progress made and the challenges encountered.

We call upon Governments to move the discussion beyond maternal and reproductive health. It is time to recognize and guarantee the full package of sexual and reproductive health and rights as a fundamental part of a reaffirmed and expanded Programme of Action.

Central and Eastern Europe is a difficult region to classify. Political and economic transformation took place over 20 years ago, yet the reality remains complex and characterized by vast disparities as the region continues to struggle with growing inequality, the consequences of the financial crisis and the redirection of major donor funds towards other regions in the last decade. The region, which includes members of the European Union, States in the Caucasus, Balkan States and other countries, remains stuck between the Global North and Global South. The substantial growth of religious extremism troubles the region and poses a major challenge to the realization of the sexual and reproductive health and rights of women and girls. The significant influence of conservative forces on Members of Parliament throughout the region has resulted in multiple, often successful, attempts to further limit women's and young people's reproductive rights and their access to basic reproductive health services.

If the extremism throughout Central and Eastern Europe is combined with other factors, such as lack of political will and a commitment to address these issues, the burden of transformation and the financial crisis, as well as the insufficient capacity of a civil society still in development, the picture hardly resembles the Western European reality. Not surprisingly, the region has the highest subregional abortion rate in the world, at 43 per 1,000 women, according to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Many of the countries have not fully used the opportunity offered by the Programme of Action to enhance the lives of their citizens.

The Programme of Action calls for the promotion to the fullest extent of the health of young people and the provision of services that are of good quality and sensitive to their needs and that safeguard the rights of adolescents to privacy, confidentiality, respect and informed consent (paras. 6.7 (a), 6.7 (b), 6.15, 7.45). However, the growing wave of extremism has substantially affected the status of the implementation of the Programme of Action in the region in recent years. Radical conservative forces have successfully opposed the introduction of comprehensive sexuality education, subsidized contraception, access to legal and safe abortion and other reproductive health services. Women and young people face countless obstacles in exercising their reproductive rights and accessing reproductive health services. They are denied the basic right to understand and control their own

fertility, which results in forced parenthood and causes intersectional discrimination. They are not able to prevent unwanted pregnancies, plan to provide for their families or themselves, reduce the risks of work or school dropout or protect themselves from sexually transmitted infections, including HIV. Unintended pregnancies for girls mean the end of education and future income generation, which drastically increases their risk of poverty, often accompanied by stigma and social exclusion. In far too many cases they lead to unsafe abortions that threaten their health or life. The suffering of women and girls from vulnerable groups is even more dramatic.

The lack of comprehensive sexuality education is the most burning issue concerning youth in the region and is reflected in adolescent pregnancy rates and high HIV/AIDS incidence among them. Despite the wide availability of World Health Organization (WHO) standards on comprehensive sexuality education, according to the WHO Regional Office, the standards have not been implemented in any of the countries of the region. Today's adolescents and young people are left alone to struggle with the increasing pressure regarding sex with, on the one hand, conflicting norms and widespread misconceptions, fears, discrimination and gender stereotypes and, on the other, a lack of youth-friendly sources of reliable information on matters of sexuality, protection from sexually transmitted infections and prevention of sexual violence. This reality and its harmful consequences are preventable to a large extent.

The ongoing review process of the International Conference on Population and Development beyond 2014 indicates that there is still much work to be done to achieve universal access to reproductive health and rights and to ensure the well-being of women and girls. In 2010 the General Assembly adopted resolution 65/234 in which decided to extend the Programme of Action beyond 2014. It is crucial to use this time to reflect on the changes and developments of the last 20 years, as well as to respond to the new, burning issues that emerged during that time. The regional and thematic review conferences held worldwide have provided an excellent source of information on the current status of implementation of the Programme of Action and have formulated recommendations for the move forward.

There has been growing understanding that it is crucial to include guarantees for sexual health and rights. The forward-looking agendas developed at the Global Youth Forum and other conferences embrace the right of all persons to take free, informed, voluntary and responsible decisions on their sexuality. The second recurring issue has been the need to guarantee universal access to legal and safe abortion. The Programme of Action states that termination of pregnancy should be safe in cases where it is legal (para. 8.25). It also urges all Governments to strengthen their commitment to women's health and to deal with the health impact of unsafe abortion as a major public health concern (ibid.). According to WHO, any illegal abortion is unsafe by definition. Sadly, it is the forced reality for many women in Central and Eastern Europe, particularly in Poland. Furthermore, it has been clear that penalization of the procedure does not reduce the number of abortions; instead, it results in higher maternal mortality and morbidity. Therefore, the extension of the Programme of Action needs to address the rights of women who need abortions where it is not legal by calling for the decriminalization of this health procedure. In this regard, it should be recalled that the Montevideo Consensus on Population and Development, adopted by the Regional Conference on Population and Development in Latin America and the Caribbean in August 2013, urges States

to consider amending their laws, regulations, strategies and public policies relating to the voluntary termination of pregnancy (para. 42) and the Declaration adopted at the Global Youth Forum held in Bali, Indonesia, in 2012 calls upon Governments to decriminalize abortion, and to create and implement policies and programmes that ensure that young women have access to safe and legal abortion and pre- and post-abortion services, without mandatory waiting periods, requirements for parental and spousal notification and/or consent or stipulated age of consent.

No progress can be made without achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. However, these are impossible without universal recognition of sexual and reproductive rights and universal access to sexual and reproductive health, with particular focus on women and young people. Women are half the world's population and today's youth is the largest generation of young people that ever lived on our planet. Guaranteeing the fundamental rights of these groups and securing funds to improve the current situation globally are essential components of achieving substantial improvement in other aspects of development, including education, health, inequality, violence and poverty reduction. The reaffirmed and expanded Programme of Action must have a gender perspective and recognize that being able to make free, independent reproductive choices is key to opening all the development doors.

We urge the States Members of the United Nations to take the following actions:

- Reaffirm the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and adapt policies with respect to reproductive rights and sexual rights
- Realize the highest attainable standard of sexual and reproductive health by ensuring comprehensive sexuality education in schools, developing and supporting youth-friendly services, ensuring access to safe and legal abortion and ensuring access to affordable methods of modern contraception
- Ensure continued, committed and sustained investments in women's sexual and reproductive health and rights
- Guarantee the right to sexual and reproductive health and sexual and reproductive rights, especially those of adolescents, marginalized groups of women and those with diverse sexual orientation and gender identities
- Collect data disaggregated by gender and age on sexual and reproductive health and rights in order to support adequate progress assessment